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# THE EXHIBITION PICTURE

BY BIRGE HARRISON, N. A.

IN a certain sense a picture must be regarded simply as a wall decoration—whose function it is to adorn the apartment in which it is hung. It must therefore be in harmony with its surroundings; and—if the canvas is to deliver its full message of beauty—the surroundings must also be in harmony with the picture. It is for this reason that the color and design of the frame are of such vital importance; and it is for this reason that a picture, which in one setting satisfies the soul with its beauty, in other surroundings becomes crude and vulgar, or weak and ineffective; for no picture is framed when it is merely inclosed in its own little ornate band of gold. The true frame is the whole apartment in which the picture hangs.

Upon one occasion a lady who had purchased one of my landscapes came to me a little later with the sad report that my canvas was not nearly so beautiful upon the walls of her drawing room as it had appeared to her when she saw it for the first time in my own studio. She had tried it in all lights, she said, and upon every wall, but much of its beauty had mysteriously disappeared. She was at a loss to understand how or why this had occurred.

Personally, I was not so greatly surprised, for I had always known that this particular picture would prove a very difficult canvas to hang to advantage. It was a moonrise off Santa Barbara with an afterglow sky of a certain delicate roseate pink which is seen nowhere save upon our own Pacific coast. I had framed the picture with exceeding care, selecting a tone of gray-green gold which I knew to be the exact complementary of the dominant note in the picture itself. As my studio walls were draped with burlap of the same tone the picture had an ideal setting in its soft and discreetly filtered light.

But when Mrs. M. informed me that her drawing-room was papered in white

and gold there was small difficulty in locating the cause of her trouble, for in the whole range of the spectrum it would have been impossible to select two tones more discordant with the general color-scheme of my picture.

However, as the lady assured me of her eagerness to make any alterations which would restore to the picture its lost beauty, I ventured to suggest that she re-paper her drawing-room with a neutral gray cartridge paper with a sub-tone of olive-green. She most obligingly consented to make the suggested change and when it was effected she came to me again, but this time in a state of mind in which enthusiasm and bewilderment were about equally mingled. Not only had the picture recovered all of its lost charm, but to her astonishment, every other object in the room had gained equally in beauty and in quality. Even the guests at her tea-parties were far better looking than before, and their gowns and their hats more alluring and delightful. Why was it? she queried.

But the conditions which exist in the ordinary drawing-room and those which are found in the average exhibition gallery are very different. In the former we have a subdued light and comparatively quiet wall spaces, while in the latter a strong top-light beats down upon walls crowded with pictures, which are often very diverse in character and very discordant in tone. With a little knowledge of the laws of color harmony it is usually easy to hang a picture to advantage in the average drawing-room; but it is almost impossible to hang one hundred pictures to advantage upon the walls of the average exhibition gallery. Every hanging committee knows this, and how difficult it is to do justice to all of the good work which it is their distressing duty to try to place well; and how inevitable it is that certain intrinsically fine works will be killed by their neighbors (which may or may not be of equal value

artistically considered; but which are more forceful and compelling in effect). Indeed there is a special type of picture which appears to glory in the trying conditions found in the ordinary exhibition gallery. As we enter the room this canvas is always the first to attract the attention, and it holds the eye until we leave the gallery in which it is hung. It is joyous, exuberant, almost vociferous in its appeal. It is painted boldly, with fresh and debonair strokes of the brush, and a free and generous use of pigment. It is vibrant with sunlight and alive with character. It *shouts* forth its message, and we enjoy the gay uproar as we do the laughter of children in the open. Unfortunately the neighboring pictures fade away and disappear; or, if they continue to exist, it is only to serve as foils for this one dominant and domineering canvas. And among the pictures thus unkindly treated, alas! there may be more than one little masterpiece which is thus doomed to "die unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air."

We all know the kind of picture to which I allude. It is produced in ever increasing numbers by a coterie of painters who have gradually come to be known as the "strong-arm group." There is, without question, a certain tendency among the artist fraternity to belittle the performance of this school, to class it as bad art, or at best a species of manufacture which is only to be rated with photography and other quasi-mechanical arts of reproduction.

Now is this a fair and reasonable appreciation, or is it simply the jaundiced view of disgruntled rivals whose own works have been ruined by unfortunate proximity to a genuine masterpiece?

For myself I am forced to admit that when I have chanced upon one of these pictures in the quiet atmosphere of an ordinary drawing-room that atmosphere has seemed to me to be considerably disturbed by its presence. My first impulse upon these occasions has been to fly—to get from under. For the gay shout of the exhibition gallery becomes a yell, and the resultant uproar reminds one of a steam calliope playing its hair-raising

tunes in a small apartment fit only for the chamber music of violin and piano.

The indictment is certainly formidable, and the conclusion would seem inevitable that in the restricted area of an ordinary living-room the strong-arm picture is bad art. Nevertheless, is this charge wholly proven? Had not these same pictures won their spurs in the arena of the great public exhibition. Had they not very generally carried off the first prizes at these same exhibitions, and had not these awards been made by juries wholly composed of artists, who must be presumed to know whereof they judged? It was quite certain that they had brought genuine pleasure to the vast majority of the picture-loving public; and I strongly suspect that they had not infrequently won the genuine if grudging and unspoken admiration of even the "kickers" themselves.

It was quite evident, therefore, that they could not be lightly dismissed as bad and worthless art; but as it was equally evident that they served no conceivable esthetic purpose in an average living-room the natural conclusion seemed to be that they were good art in a bad setting, and that they were out of their proper sphere in the drawing-room of the modern house.

Just here I think we have the crux of the whole situation. The normal place for the great exhibition picture is the great exhibition! For this it was painted, and here only will it always show to advantage. Out of the general exhibition it must graduate into the public museum, which, after all, is only the apotheosis of the yearly exhibition, with the same conditions as to lighting, hanging and spacing, and the same inevitable crowding of many canvases upon the same restricted wall space.

Here, as the "museum picture," it will continue to hold its own, and to give perennial pleasure to the throngs of the art-hungry who are presumed to crowd the galleries day by day.

In the meantime, however, it seems hardly fair that so many delicate and beautiful pictures should be overshadowed in our current exhibitions by this

one type of art—admirable if you will, but not to be favored to the exclusion and practical annihilation of all other forms of pictorial beauty. It is the gradual and perhaps more or less unconscious recognition of this fact, of the handicap under which the less obtrusive forms of art must labor in the hurly-burly of our general exhibitions, which is fostering the development of still another method of showing pictures to the public—the one-man show, and the small group exhibition—excellent examples of the latter being the yearly exhibition of the “Ten American Painters,” and the group exhibits which follow one another throughout the season at the MacDowell Club in New York. In these smaller exhibitions a dignified and harmonious arrangement of the pictures is possible. Each work is content to rest upon its own merits, and there is no attempt and no desire to enhance the effect of one work at the expense of another; the more discerning among our connoisseurs of art have come to appreciate the fact that greater enjoyment may be had from an hour in one of these quiet and homogeneous smaller exhibitions than in a whole weary day spent in perambulating the rooms of the great yearly exhibition, with its noisy appeal and its somewhat over-insistent demands upon the attention.

In the great days of the Dutch and Italian Renaissance, when art was a part of the everyday life of the people, there were no picture exhibitions. Pictures, like furniture or rugs or tapestries, were ordered directly of the artists, to fill certain specified places with easily ascertainable conditions as to lighting and general surroundings.

Later on, as a result of devastating wars, these ideal conditions were destroyed. Then came the robbers and the vandals—of whom Napoleon was easily past-master—who tore the canvases from their appointed niches in church and convent, palace and private home. Not knowing at first just what disposition to make of their precious loot, it was heaped pell-mell into the garrets and the cellars of the palaces of the conquerors; and out of these storehouses of stolen treasure

have gradually developed the art museums of modern times.

In the old days the artist and the patron worked together to produce a work of art, which rarely failed to harmonize with its surroundings, and to fitly fill and decorate the wall or the chapel for which it was originally destined.

At present, however, the artist, working apart in his studio and touching hands with the amateur only through the medium of the dealer or the general exhibitions, is it any wonder that so few works of art look well in their final resting place? When we ask the untrained art collector to select out of the ruck of a modern exhibition a picture or pictures which will show to advantage under the totally different conditions which obtain in his private house, we set him a task which would tax the best knowledge and skill and intuition of the trained expert. And even the expert is often enough at fault, as is clearly shown by the poor quality of many of the pictures which are found in our great museums and by the conditions of their hanging. Indeed in the final summing up it is against the museums that the most serious indictment lies. If the great museum fills any useful place in the economy of modern life it is as the custodian and the intelligent showman of the art treasures of the people. Upon their directors lies the obligation and the duty to study with care all that has been accomplished in the past in this line and to apply the knowledge thus obtained to the proper installation of our heritage of beauty, so that we, the untrained and inexpert public, may enjoy them to the utmost.

In the arrangement and installation of certain galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (notably those devoted to furniture) this duty has been clearly recognized, and much progress has been made in an intelligent and most attractive display of the various carvings, tapestries and objects of antique household art which go to make up the collection.

But when we come to the pictures we find everywhere the old discredited exhibition method still in vogue. The most

valuable, and, in the eyes of the public, the most interesting of our public art treasures are for the most part still shown to the greatest disadvantage. The walls are crowded to the ceiling with pictures, frame against frame; the "exhibition picture" dominates the room here as in the great current exhibitions, and the smaller masterpieces make shift as best they can. Nowhere in any of our museums, I think, has the attempt been made to hang the cabinet pictures—those which were intended for the home, for the intimate daily companionship of the people—in rooms such as they would have occupied had their real mission been fulfilled.

If to this it be objected that the best endowed museum in America would not be able to finance the installations which are here suggested we reply that very much could be accomplished along these lines without the expenditure of a single dollar in excess of what is now being spent. It would be possible, for instance, to hang the pictures in a handsome and attractive manner, with restful wall spaces between each picture, by the simple expedient of dividing the collection into two or more units; each unit to be exhibited in turn for a month or so, and the few recognized great masterpieces to remain permanently upon the walls. It would be possible also to separate the collection into harmonious and homogeneous groups, according to the character of the pictures and their artistic affiliations. These groups could then be hung in separate galleries—the great "exhibition pictures" in the larger rooms where the light is strong and the distances adequate for their best display, the cabinet pictures and other works of more delicate and non-assertive character in the smaller galleries where the light is discreet and the wall spaces are in ratio to the size of the canvases. If the plea is made that this disposition of the collections would interfere with the chronological arrangement of the galleries we should be strongly tempted to reply that chronology might "go hang," that art was designed to please, not to instruct, and that the place for chronology is in the text-books, not in the galleries; and

we might add that this is particularly the case where a didactic or schoolmasterly arrangement of the collections would interfere with the most attractive display of the pictures themselves and their fullest enjoyment. Our civilization has surely reached a point where recognition should be accorded to the fact that the art of picture hanging is an art by itself—an art which is nearly if not quite as difficult to acquire and nearly if not quite as important as the art of painting pictures. It demands great taste, great talent and long training; and until these requisites are possessed in the fullest measure by the experts to whom this delicate task is assigned the most serious efforts of some of the greatest masters of the world must remain largely unappreciated.

The art of city-planning (whose splendid results are so apparent in our beautiful city of Washington, admittedly one of the handsomest capital cities in the world) is making rapid headway among the growing municipalities of our western States. And if this movement is carried out with discretion and intelligence, if reasonable leeway is allowed for the exercise of individual taste in building, so that the danger of formalism is avoided—of that rigid and desiccating adherence to plan which robbed the modern city of Paris of much of its old-time charm and all of its character, we may look for many beautiful and attractive cities in our trans-Mississippi areas, in the not far-distant future. The impulse which lies behind this movement is also making itself felt in other ways. Many of these same cities are beginning to demand their fair share in the great inheritance of art, are gathering the nucleus of collections, building museums, and founding private and municipal art associations. Any discussion of this subject, therefore, which may tend to save them from some of the errors into which our older institutions have drifted from sheer force of inertia, inheritance, and blindly accepted tradition would seem well worth while, especially at this time when the exhibition season is opening and attention is particularly directed thereto.